

# Beyond Postmodernism

Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture

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## Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism – Contingent Referentiality?

In a much-quoted survey Lance Olsen<sup>1</sup> reported an astounding increase in occurrences of the term 'postmodern' in American newspapers from 1980 through 1984 to 1987 at a ratio of 2 : 116 : 247. In his turn, Hans Bertens<sup>2</sup> charted a "history of the debate on postmodernism from its tentative beginnings in the 1950s to its overwhelming self-confidence in the early 1990s". From the later 1990s onwards, however, this narrative of the progress of postmodernism appears to lose direction. Although no statistical data are available, the quantity of references to postmodernism in scholarly publications as well as in the daily press seems to decrease, as does the heatedness of the debate. Major disputants, such as Ihab Hassan or Linda Hutcheon, have long since shifted their focus to other fields. Scholarly publications of the past decade or so are less geared to breaking new ground than to serving educational purposes for student consumption,<sup>3</sup> either in the normative form of readers<sup>4</sup> or as compendiums.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, subtitles such as Hans Bertens' 'A History',<sup>6</sup> cited above, or 'Eine Bilanz' in the *Merkur* special issue on postmodernism,<sup>7</sup> seem to suggest that we have entered a period of stock-taking and that a long-standing dispute is entering the process of being archived. Looking at postmodernism as an 'entity', as something which can be summarized, analyzed, and taught leads to a situation analogous to the point in time which Malcolm Bradbury used from hindsight as his delimitation and turning-point from modernism to postmodernism when he wrote:

- 1 Lance Olsen, "The Next Generation in Fiction", *Virginia Quarterly Review* 65 (1989), 277-87, 277.
- 2 Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern. A History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 14.
- 3 On the specific concern of postmodernism's consequences and implications in the educational field, see Klaus Stierstorfer, Laurenz Volkmann (eds.), *Teaching Postmodernism—Postmodern Teaching* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2003).
- 4 See for example Joseph Natoli, Linda Hutcheon (eds.), *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1993).
- 5 Peter V. Zima, *Moderne / Postmoderne. Gesellschaft, Philosophie, Literatur* (Tübingen, Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 1997, 2nd ed. 2001).
- 6 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern. A History*.
- 7 Karl-Heinz Bohrer, Kurt Scheel, *Postmoderne. Eine Bilanz. Sonderheft Merkur* 52/9f. (1998).

going on in British literature. Since we are always dealing with constructed models of postmodernisms, or 'post-postmodernisms', I want to suggest that we at least attempt to bring some clarity into studies of 'post-postmodernisms' by laying open the criteria according to which these phenomena are constructed and analysed. Instead of subsuming anything and everything under fashionable new labels, we should try to keep our eyes and minds open for new departures in contemporary literature, some of which I have tried to sketch in my short account of four recent trends in British fiction. These new departures cannot neatly be divided into 'schools' or anything of the sort; they rather testify to current concerns and new ways of dealing with established narrative conventions. It therefore does not come as a surprise that there is a certain amount of overlap between the various trends outlined above, which highlights the fact that some of the authors are interested in more than one new development at the same time. If one wanted to come up with a sort of umbrella concept, designating an interest that is shared by many of the authors that I have discussed, it would be the return to ethical questions and a renewed interest in narratives. As I have tried to show in this article, this does not mean, however, that British authors at the turn of the century just nostalgically hark back to former times and choose to ignore the developments that led to postmodernist fiction; they rather pursue exciting new roads, the destinations and intersections of which have yet to be explored.

DIETMAR BÖHNKE

## Shades of Gray: The Peculiar Postmodernism of Alasdair Gray

The contemporary British writer Alasdair Gray (b. 1934) has often been seen by literary critics as the postmodern Scottish writer par excellence. Thus he appears as a paradigmatic example of postmodern fiction in works by Brian McHale (1987), Alison Lee (1990), and Stephen Baker (2000).<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will attempt to re-evaluate this view in the light of recent developments in literary and cultural theory and with the help of Gray's own writings – in particular the novels *Lanark* (1981), *Poor Things* (1992) and *A History Maker* (1994).<sup>2</sup> I will try to show the continuities as well as the complications that emerge by putting Gray's fiction in a postmodern context, thereby commenting on the current state of the postmodern paradigm in general and its relevance in contemporary British and Scottish literatures in particular. With that, I hope my essay will engage in a dialogue with the other contributions in this volume on the possibility of going 'beyond postmodernism'.

### The Trouble with Postmodernism

The long and heated debates about the concept of postmodernism during the past few decades do not seem to have resulted in a universally agreed understanding of the phenomenon. On the contrary, precisely because it has become so widespread and is now being used in a variety of different fields with almost as many different meanings, it has become increasingly confused. In *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* Hans Bertens writes:

Postmodernism is an exasperating term, and so are postmodern, postmodernist, postmodernity, and whatever else one might come across in the way of derivation. In the avalanche of articles and books that have made use of the term since the late

1 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1987); Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990); Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000).

2 Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1981); *Poor Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992); *A History Maker* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994). Further page references in the text (abbreviated as 'L' and 'HM').

1950s, postmodernism has been applied at different levels of conceptual abstraction to a wide range of objects and phenomena in what we used to call reality. Postmodernism, then, is several things at once.<sup>3</sup>

This evasive quality of the concept of postmodernism together with its proliferation is the context in which claims for the demise of postmodernism as a whole are beginning to be heard. This is also, I take it, the starting point for this volume, which attempts to chart the as yet unknown – or unnamed – territory 'beyond postmodernism'. The questioning of and challenge to postmodernism is not quite so new, however: it was with the growing influence of postmodern ideas and theories in the 1970s and '80s, especially in the academic world, that criticism of the concept also became stronger, culminating perhaps in the so-called 'science wars' or even 'culture wars' in the 1990s, mainly in the U. S.<sup>4</sup> Even though the atmosphere meanwhile seems to have cooled down somewhat, it is far from clear whether one of the 'opponents' has been victorious and whether the talk of the death of postmodernism is justified. There are indications, however, of a still-evolving 'moderate' position. It is possible to detect in more recent discussions of postmodernism a cautious movement towards some kind of compromise between the more extreme and relativist claims of some practitioners of postmodernism and the traditional positivist position. Hans Bertens has commented on this as follows:

Radical postmodern theory must be regarded as a transitional phenomenon, as instrumental in the creation of a more moderate new paradigm that is already building upon its achievements while ignoring its more excessive claims. [...] After an overlong period in which Enlightenment universalist representationalism dominated the scene, and a brief, but turbulent period in which its opposite, radical anti-representationalism, captured the imagination, we now find ourselves in the difficult position of trying to honor the claims of both, of seeing the values of both representation and anti-representation, of both consensus and dissensus. Postmodern or radicalized modern – this is our fate: to reconcile the demands of

3 Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.

4 This was/is a usually polemical exchange of broadsides between scientists on the one hand, who defend the integrity and relatively value-free nature of science and what is often collectively called 'postmodernist' scholars from the humanities on the other, who investigate the social and cultural implications of science. One of the high (or low) points of these 'wars' was the 'Sokal hoax' in 1996, an allegedly relativist but in fact nonsensical article planted by the theoretical physicist Alan Sokal in *Social Text*, one of the leading American journals in cultural studies. Cf. Paul R. Gross, Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998); Andrew Ross (ed.), *Science Wars* (Durham, London: Duke UP, 1996); Alan Sokal, Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile, 1998); Daniel Cordle, *Literature, Science and the Two Cultures Debate* (Aldershot, Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999).

rationality and those of the sublime, to negotiate a permanent crisis in the name of precarious stabilities.<sup>5</sup>

The present volume certainly is one instance of this negotiation process. In any case, it seems to me rather futile to discuss these matters in very general and abstract terms, where the multiplicity of possible backgrounds, theoretical frameworks and different connotations not only of 'postmodernism' necessarily leads to incompatibilities and misunderstandings. This is why I will narrow my focus to Scottish literature and the work of Alasdair Gray, a closer investigation of which might finally result in more general (although certainly tentative) conclusions about the current state of postmodernism as a whole.

In the field of British and especially Scottish literature, critics have frequently detected a more detached position towards postmodernism even in its 'heyday', if not actual hostility. Although works such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or the novels of Salman Rushdie are widely seen as postmodern literature, it seems that the British novel in general also retains a number of 'pre-postmodern' features and is still very much rooted in the realist tradition. Many critics see it as adopting a moderate or middle position, as expressed by Stephen Earnshaw:

In the British novel the tradition is one where the novel is a laboratory for analysis of manners and mores within a liberal humanist framework, and it is this, as much as any empirical turn of mind, which constrains the British novel post Second World War to steer a middle course in reaction to modernist and postmodernist dominance.<sup>6</sup>

In Scottish literature the opposition to postmodernism seems to be even more pronounced. Gavin Wallace has talked of Scottish literature as a "tradition that has been slow to learn the sensitivity to narrative experiment and formal self-awareness taken for granted in other literatures"<sup>7</sup> and one critic even went as far as to suggest that "Scottish writers refuse postmodernity".<sup>8</sup> Alasdair Gray himself has expressed his dislike of the label 'postmodern' in connection to his works many times, in interviews as well as in his fiction.<sup>9</sup> This may also have

5 Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 242-43, 248.

6 Steven Earnshaw, "Novel Voices" in Clive Bloom, Gary Day (eds.), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain. Volume Three: 1956-1999* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 51-75, 65.

7 Gavin Wallace, "Voices in Empty Houses: The Novel of Damaged Identity" in Gavin Wallace, Randall Stevenson (eds.), *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993), 217-31, 228.

8 Hanne Tange, "'Psychadelic Tartans': Reflections on the Contemporary Scottish Novel", *Anglofiles* 107 (2000), 1-27, 16.

9 An example of this occurs in his short story "Edison's Tractatus", where he writes: "For several years I have been perplexed by the adjective *post-modern*, especially when applied to my own writing, but have now decided it is an academic substitute for *contemporary* or *fashionable*. Its prefix honestly announces it as a specimen of intellectual afterbirth." *Mavis Belfrage: A Romantic Novel with Five Shorter Tales* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 152-3.

to do with the perceived inferiorisation of the literary work itself in much 'postmodern' criticism, where 'theory' is often tantamount to the actual object of investigation. Therefore, in the following analysis of the ambiguous postmodernism of Gray's fiction, I will try to accord the literary work at least the same status as the theoretical views, thus hopefully facilitating an intervention of the 'object' of discussion in the postmodernism debate itself. I will proceed from the question of the more specifically *literary* expression of postmodernism in Gray's work to the more comprehensive – and possibly more problematic – question of postmodern *theory* and its relation to Gray's novels. In doing so, I am trying to circumvent to some extent one of the pitfalls of the catch-all concept of postmodernism: that by calling a writer 'postmodern' because of his literary techniques one runs the risk of simultaneously invoking all kinds of controversial theoretical tenets that are also commonly denominated 'postmodern' but which may be difficult to reconcile with the work of the author in question.

### Gray's Postmodern Writing: Metafiction, Intertextuality, Science Fiction

Many aspects of Gray's work can doubtless be regarded as almost prototypically postmodern. This is certainly true for the more strictly literary features commonly associated with postmodernism. Since the publication of his first novel *Lanark* (1981) his self-conscious style and his frequent use of metafictional devices have become something of a trademark of Gray's writing. In the Epilogue in *Lanark* (which comes four chapters before the end of the novel) we find an instance of that set element of postmodern literature, the 'interview' between 'author' and protagonist (whose name is Lanark), as well as the hilarious "Index of Plagiarisms" which details (mock) sources and influences for the novel as a whole. There is a typically postmodern *mise-en-abyme* when the author tells Lanark:

"[...] Read this and you'll understand. The critics will accuse me of self-indulgence but I don't care." With a reckless gesture he handed Lanark a paper from the bed. It was covered with childish handwriting and many words were scored out or inserted with little arrows. Much of it seemed to be dialogue but Lanark's eye was caught by

Gray likes to ridicule the notion of postmodernism in his work (other examples would be the mock criticisms he frequently includes on the covers of his works – for example in the paperback edition of *Poor Things* – or passages in *Something Leather* (London: Cape, 1990), e. g. 145-46, and *A History Maker*, 202-03; and he has told me in a personal letter that "[a]ll postmodernist debates and criticism I have encountered devoted so much energy to defining what post-modernism was that they had no time to illuminate anything else. [...] Post Modernism [sic] seems the creation of scholars acquiring a territory to lecture upon." (31 December 1997).

a sentence in italics which said: *Much of it seemed to be dialogue but Lanark's eye was caught by a sentence in italics which said: Lanark gave the paper back asking, "What's that supposed to prove?" "I am your author." (L, 481)*

It is already obvious from this passage that Gray is being self-conscious or ironic even about his own metafictional techniques (note the passage "The critics will accuse me of self-indulgence ..."), and this is borne out by the Epilogue as a whole, which keeps referring in footnotes and the marginalia of the 'Index' to a whole tradition of literary forebears that is being reworked and rewritten here, including the metafiction of a Kurt Vonnegut or a Flann O'Brien. Therefore, Gray's use of postmodern elements is motivated less by a desire to be 'up to date' or to show playfulness for its own sake but always by some deeper relevance to his intended 'message'. The Epilogue thus offers the reader a kind of 'elevated perspective',<sup>10</sup> from which they can get a more comprehensive view of the complicated structure of the book (which has two parts with four 'books' in the order 3-1-2-4 and two main protagonists) as well as its genesis and 'influences', including autobiographical information.

Similar motivations lie behind Gray's application of other literary techniques that are commonly regarded as postmodern, such as intertextuality. In *Poor Things*, for example, there are multiple references and allusions to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, from the central story of a young woman being 'created' out of the dead body of a suicide and the brain of her unborn child in *fin-de-siècle* Glasgow, to the different names of the protagonists<sup>11</sup> or the epistolary form of much of the novel. Once again, there is a deeper significance to these intertextual games. Underlying the whole novel is Gray's concern for the 'poor things' of the title, the powerless and suppressed classes of Western society in general and of Glasgow's Victorian as well as present society in particular. There is strong criticism of the *Frankenstein*-like recreation of a false and sanitised version of Glasgow's past during the

10 I am referring here to Stephen Bernstein's perceptive interpretation of *Lanark* in *Alasdair Gray* (Cranbury: Associated UPs, 1999), in which he stresses the aspect of perspective, emphasising the importance of elevated points of view, such as the Ben Rua mountain or the Glasgow Necropolis in the novel, as well as the motif of mapping and triangulation, where a third perspective is needed to get a comprehensive view of the land / the life / the novel, and suggests that the Epilogue is the site of such a holistic perspective.

11 For example, there is Godwin 'God' Baxter, the surgeon who 'creates' Bella (the young woman, who also calls herself Victoria). His name can be read as an allusion to Mary Shelley's father William Godwin and, as Marie Odile Pittin has pointed out, also to one of his friends, the Scottish merchant William Baxter. Cf. Marie Odile Pittin, "Alasdair Gray: A Strategy of Ambiguity" in Susanne Hagemann (ed.), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1996), 199-215, 212; the name can also be read – since his full name is given as Godwin Bysshe Baxter – to her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley. Bella/Victoria herself, on the other hand, constitutes the link to Mary Shelley's mother Mary Wollstonecraft, if not in name but in her development in the course of the novel into a socialist and feminist doctor.

festivities in 1990 when Glasgow was Cultural Capital of Europe.<sup>12</sup> The underside of exploitation, poverty and suffering comes back to haunt the city, as it were, in Gray's book. This criticism can also be broadened to include the more general injustices and exploitation at work in Western societies in Victorian times as well as our own age, which have a lot to do with people's (and companies') greed for knowledge, fame and money – a theme that is clearly among Gray's constant concerns as they emerge from his works, most notably, perhaps, in *Lanark*, where the dystopian vision of Books 3 and 4 in particular invites an allegorical reading along these lines.

The intertextual link with *Frankenstein* brings up another element that is frequently connected to postmodernism in literature: the use of 'science fiction' elements or conventions. This is sometimes seen as proof of the erosion of boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' literature. Brian McHale goes as far as to detect a simultaneous "science-fictionalization of postmodernism" and "postmodernization of science fiction".<sup>13</sup> In some sense, Gray's work can be seen as a case in point of this development: all the three novels I have chosen for examination here (including his latest two<sup>14</sup>) use science fiction elements to a greater or lesser extent. However, once again this is not merely a fashionable ploy.<sup>15</sup> Just as in *Frankenstein*, which is often seen as a classic or precursor of the science fiction tradition, it is the general question of the virtues of scientific progress and the responsibilities (not only) of the scientist within Gray's critical vision of Western society which is raised in his novels. In *Poor Things*, these issues have a decidedly contemporary ring to them, concerning the problems of transplantation and the special status of the human brain/mind and, by implication, the dangers of genetic manipulation. Such problems involving the role of morality in science are

12 Gray opposed the official celebrations at the time because of their élite character and disconcert of the actual workers living in Glasgow. He was also associated with the counter-campaign called Workers' City. *Poor Things* was written at the same time or shortly afterwards and published in 1992. In his earlier novel *Something Leather* (1990), Gray had already commented on the whole affair in a chapter significantly entitled "Culture Capitalism".

13 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 65ff., 68ff.

14 Gray's works published since *A History Maker* are in different genres: novella/short stories (*Mavis Belfrage*), political pamphlet (*Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* 1997, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), play (*Working Legs*, Glasgow: Dog and Bone, 1997), and literary history/criticism (*The Book of Prefaces*, London: Bloomsbury, 2000) respectively.

15 I also have my doubts about McHale's explanation for the phenomenon, who takes science fiction's interest in the construction/representation of a variety of (often radically different, conflicting) 'worlds' as the element that makes it amenable to postmodernism/postmodernist fiction, which he sees as dominated by ontological issues (as opposed to the epistemological 'dominant' in modernist fiction, this distinction being itself certainly debatable).

explicitly mentioned several times in the novel.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that these 'science fiction' elements thus form part of Gray's more comprehensive social criticism rather than being employed for their own sake or as an expression of some 'ontological dominant' (in that, Gray stands in a tradition reaching from Mary Shelley via H. G. Wells to Huxley and Orwell). This is equally apparent in *Lanark* (especially in the dystopian and apocalyptic vision of Glasgow and more generally Western society that he evokes in Book 4 of the novel) and in *A History Maker*. The latter may be Gray's most science-fictional work to date, being set in 23rd-century Scotland (he describes it on the cover in characteristic fashion as "a kilted sci-fi yarn full of poetry and porridge, courage and sex"), but it is above all a meditation on the (im)possibility of Utopia at the end of the twentieth century, since the apparently ideal society depicted in the novel soon turns out to be far from satisfactory and the reader is left with a highly ambiguous ending in which a conspiracy to bring back the old days of inequality and oppression is narrowly defeated but the future seems insecure. Therefore, if the science fiction elements in Gray's work are a sign of his postmodernism, they are certainly also part of his 'message' of social criticism.

In the light of the foregoing evidence (and I could add other relevant features that point in the same direction<sup>17</sup>), there can be little doubt that Gray is indeed a postmodern writer, always with the qualification that postmodernism must not be understood as irresponsible relativism and playfulness for its own sake. However, the purely *literary* expression of postmodernism through the above techniques is only one side of the coin, and possibly the less problematic one. Much more controversial is Gray's involvement with the more *theoretical* tenets of postmodernism, as I will try to argue in the following; and this may also complicate the concept of postmodernism more generally.

16 One example comes on page 68, where Baxter says about the operation he carried out to (re-) create Bella/Victoria: "Selfish greed and impatience drove me and THAT [...] is why our arts and sciences cannot improve the world, despite what liberal philanthropists say. Our vast new scientific skills are first used by the damnably greedy selfish impatient parts of our nature and nation, the careful kindly social part always comes second."

17 One important aspect that I cannot explore in detail here is Gray's personal inter-art discourse between the written text and the illustrations, design and typography of the books. Since he is originally a painter, his works tend to be *Gesamtkunstwerke*, and this intermediality can be regarded as part of the 'postmodern' quality of his works. In this respect, I do not quite agree with Vera Nünning's argument in this volume, which seems to suggest that this aspect somehow represents a new departure in contemporary literature. In my view, it has very much been part of the postmodern literary project from the beginning. Arguably, the same could be said for some of the other "new departures", such as the return to ethical questions and the revival of narrative.

### Interlude: Gray's Historiographic Metafiction

In reality, it is unfortunately hardly ever possible to separate literary theory and practice as clearly as I have suggested above. If metafiction and intertextuality can be seen as 'postmodern' literary means without necessarily linking them to more comprehensive theories of postmodernism (after all, they are by no means new techniques), this is already a little more complicated in the case of science fiction. It becomes even more problematic with the category of 'historiographic metafiction', the application of which to Gray's work can be seen as another indication of its (ambiguous) postmodern quality. This is why I will try to evaluate Gray's writing in the light of this concept before moving on to the more exclusively theoretical issues.

In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon proposes historiographic metafiction as the supreme expression of postmodernism in literature.<sup>18</sup> The subtitle of this study explicitly links the terms 'history' and 'fiction' by the third term 'theory'. Thus, if we can classify Gray's writings as historiographic metafiction, they would simultaneously be linked to more comprehensive postmodern theories. And indeed, there seem to be significant convergences, if we take the following definition by Hutcheon as a point of reference:

Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains [i. e. literature, history, theory]: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. [...]

[H]istoriographic metafiction asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time.<sup>19</sup>

It is not difficult to apply this concept to the three novels under discussion here, and thus to link them to the 'postmodern' problematisation of the question of history.<sup>20</sup>

18 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988). This study has been very influential in postmodern literary criticism and introduced the concept of historiographic metafiction to an international audience. The practical conflation of this concept with postmodernist fiction by Hutcheon is certainly problematic and has subsequently been criticised, among others by Ansgar Nünning (cf. his study in two volumes *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion*, Trier: WVT, 1995).

19 Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 5 and 105.

20 I cannot here go into the details of the more general theoretical discussion of history in the postmodern context. Suffice it to mention the growing scepticism towards notions of 'objective' history and the stress on diverse, even contradicting 'histories' as opposed to universal 'History'. In this context, both Michel Foucault's emphasis on the "discursive" formation of knowledge and Hayden White's investigations of the narrative structure of

Most obviously, *Poor Things* engages with these issues not only through its historical setting and reconstruction of Victorianism but also by its use of multiple narratives that contradict and sometimes exclude each other. The title page of the novel tells the reader that he is going to read "Episodes from the early life of Archibald McCandless M. D. Scottish Public Health Officer, edited by Alasdair Gray". The printed 'facsimile' of McCandless's memoir is prefaced with an Introduction by the 'editor' Gray in which he discusses and defends the historical accuracy of the 'document'. This is followed by "A Letter from Victoria McCandless M. D. to her eldest surviving descendant in 1974 correcting what she claims are errors in *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer* by her late husband Archibald McCandless M. D. b.1857-d.1911", which was allegedly found together with the memoir, as well as "Notes Critical and Historical" by Gray, in which the different versions are again discussed and 'annotated' in mock-scholarly fashion and complemented with nineteenth-century illustrations. The effect of these various competing discourses is that the reader is left disoriented at the end, unable to decide between the different versions and narratives. However, as Marie Odile Pittin writes, "[t]he point is not to tell the 'truth' from the 'fantasy' but to enjoy the weird, totally phantasmagoric result of their being pitted against each other in a story that clamours in various ways for the supremely elusive, ironical notion of 'reality', a problem which indeed is *not* to be solved".<sup>21</sup> This is clearly reminiscent of the more theoretical discussion of history, and of postmodernism in general. Moreover, the question of literature/fiction vs. history is directly addressed in the novel.<sup>22</sup>

*A History Maker* already signals its commitment to the same theme in its title. Although the novel is set in the future, it is again presented as an historical document, its structure bearing a striking resemblance to that of *Poor Things*: it is another neglected "manuscript" written by the main protagonist Wat Dryhope, and edited with a Prologue and "Notes and Glossary Explaining Obscurities" by his mother. This raises the same sort of questions about reliability, historical objectivity and the relation of fact to fiction, even if there

history/historiography have contributed to a 'turn to history' in literary studies and have been used as theoretical background for the study of literary works.

21 Pittin, "Strategy of Ambiguity", 213.

22 Cf. the following statement by the 'editor' Alasdair Gray in the Introduction: "I fear [the local historian] Michael Donnelly and I disagree about this book. He thinks it a blackly humorous fiction into which some real experiences and historical facts have been cunningly woven, a book like Scott's *Old Mortality* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. I think it like Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*; a loving portrait of an astonishingly good, stout, intelligent, eccentric man recorded by a friend with a memory for dialogue. [...] I also told Donnelly that I had written enough fiction to know history when I read it. He said he had written enough history to recognize fiction. To this there was only one reply – I had to become a historian. I did so. I am one." (*Poor Things*, XIII-XIV).



is not so much contradiction between different versions of the story but rather additions of (vital) information in the Prologue and Notes, including the progress and defeat of the conspiracy that is central to the plot. Most interestingly, perhaps, the novel seems to address the thesis of the "end of history", as formulated by the 'postmodern' theoretician Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to avoid drawing parallels between Gray's scenario of a seemingly utopian society in which history is "a thing of the past" (HM, 32) and Fukuyama's idea that history as we know it will come to an end in the foreseeable future because the Western capitalist system in its liberal, democratic form is being accepted and taken over on a global basis, especially if we take into account that in the novel history seems to have 'stopped' precisely around the end of the twentieth century. Significantly, though, Gray is satirically challenging the notion of the end of history rather than endorsing it. I have pointed out how ambiguous the 'utopia' of this society really is. Not surprisingly, the myth of a historyless society is also being undermined at every possible turn in the novel, for allusions to political, literary, cultural or linguistic history abound. Indeed, at one point Gray explicitly links the notion of the end of history to postmodernism in highly critical tones, when he outlines the different ideas of history of different epochs and peoples in the "Notes", one of which is labelled 'postmodernism':

POSTMODERNISM happened when landlords, businessmen, brokers and bankers who owned the rest of the world had used new technologies to destroy the power of labour unions. Like owners of earlier empires they felt that history had ended because they and their sort could now dominate the world for ever. This indifference to most people's wellbeing and taste appeared in the fashionable art of the wealthy. Critics called their period *postmodern* to separate it from the modern world begun by the Renaissance when most creative thinkers believed they could improve their community. Postmodernists had no interest in the future, which they expected to be an amusing rearrangement of things they already knew. Postmodernism did not survive disasters caused by "competitive exploitation of human and natural resources" in the twenty-first century. (HM, 202-03)

On the one hand, this refers back to Gray's social criticism and concern with the dispossessed mentioned earlier; on the other, it points forward to his engagement with and criticism of the more general theories of postmodernism, to which I will now – by way of conclusion – turn my attention. It should have become evident, in any case, that Gray's novels can be analysed fruitfully against the background of historiographic metafiction, and that they are thus implicated in the postmodern context.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean an unproblematic

23 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Although Fukuyama has often been called a postmodernist, the relation of his theories to postmodernism is certainly complicated and arguably controversial.

24 *Lanark* can also be analysed in this context, the emphasis in this case being on the problem of the fragmented subject and the (re-)construction of personal history.

endorsement of the more extreme postmodern positions which tend to see history as nothing but discourse, as only 'text', for Gray clearly stresses the ultimate importance of history/ies for personal as well as national identity. This leads directly to the more general conclusions concerning Gray's place within the postmodern framework.

### Gray's Postmodern Thinking? – Continuities and Complications

If Gray's work is, as we have seen, clearly linked to so many aspects commonly denominated as 'postmodern', why is there such a resistance on his own part and that of many critics to call him a postmodernist? As I have indicated earlier, this is clearly due to the perception of certain theoretical convictions of 'postmodernism'. This is why I would finally like to come back to the more general question of postmodernism raised at the beginning of this essay, and conclude my analysis with a closer look at some of the theoretical aspects of postmodernism in relation to Gray's work. It would be very difficult to make a list of the most important ideas of postmodern theory, if only because postmodernism can mean so many different things. There are, however, recurring themes in the literature on postmodernism<sup>25</sup> that go some way to giving a glimpse of possible basic tenets. Thus postmodernism is widely seen as 'antifoundational' in many respects, as mounting a radical critique to established views and values (cf. e.g. Jean-François Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives"). It is commonly regarded as undermining, questioning or problematising all kinds of concepts and positions, including the very foundations of the 'modern' worldview (often linked to the Enlightenment): such as notions of progress, the unitary subject, meaning, truth, reality, representation etc. Connected to that is postmodernism's perceived emphasis on fragmentation, multiplicity and pluralism, its focus on surface rather than depth (which is not meant as a qualitative judgement here). This is about as far as the 'consensus' goes. Even if this list remains very general and fragmentary, it does give an impression of the main character of postmodernism as well as pointing to the reasons for opposition and criticism against it.

The present volume of essays is a good illustration of the variety of ideas and views connected with the concept, as well as of some of its recurring themes and concerns. It is also, crucially, an attempt to analyse the more

25 I am thinking here of general introductions to the topic, such as Walter Truett Anderson (ed.), *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), Steven Connor's *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford, Cambridge/Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), Hans Bertens's *The Idea of the Postmodern*, or Lawrence E. Cahoone's massive *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford, Cambridge/Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).

problematic aspects of postmodernism and overcome the unproductive oppositional mentality that unfortunately frequently prevails among the academic 'camps' of postmodernists and anti-postmodernists. I hope that my analysis of the novels of Alasdair Gray shows that there is something to be gained if these theoretical battles are not allowed to prevent the fruitful application of 'postmodern' categories to contemporary writing. However, in recognition of the remaining problems entailed in the concept, I will not finish this essay without briefly highlighting the complications that emerge from putting Gray's work in the context of the above-mentioned 'basic tenets' of postmodernism.

On the one hand, as my investigation of the three novels should have shown, Gray's work is in tune with many of these ideas: the criticism of (techno-scientific) progress, the problematisation of the unitary subject and of monolithic or essentialist explanations, the emphasis on fragmentation, multiplicity and pluralism. On the other hand, it is clear from the foregoing that 'traditional' concepts such as (liberal) Humanism, Modernism or Realism do not go along easily with a postmodern frame of mind. And yet, in the work of (British) 'postmodern' writers they are often very important. They are certainly integral to the fiction of Alasdair Gray, as can be shown by a closer analysis of his writings. Without going into details, it is certainly justified to say that Gray's work is suffused by a humanist ethos, that the modernist tradition is very important to him (he has called himself a Modernist), and that the fusion of realism and fantasy is commonly held to be one of the hallmarks of his writing.

Even more problematic – and more important for Gray's fiction – is the possibility of strong political views and involvement and the question of (Scottish) nationalism.<sup>26</sup> These are quite difficult to reconcile with most accounts of postmodernism, mainly because they seem to call for some degree of essentialism. There are two points to be made in this context. First, many if not all postmodern theorists seem to follow a more or less rigid (political) agenda themselves. It is one of the much-discussed paradoxes of postmodernism that despite the radical challenge to all kinds of theorems, it does propose an alternative view that to some is just as vulnerable to criticism as the more traditional concepts. Second, the way in which Alasdair Gray's

political convictions and concerns are expressed in his fiction is anything but essentialist. On the contrary, his work is characterised by a permanent 'strategy of ambiguity' that stresses the provisional nature of any statement or theory and is intensely self-critical. The latter comes out almost as a moral imperative in his writing, and together with the emphasis on irreducible complexity, on the multiplicity of possible approaches and perspectives, it can be suggestive for the current debate on the 'future' of postmodernism.

Central to my argument – if perhaps more implicit than explicit – in this essay is the proposition that it is possible to use literary works themselves also in a theoretical discussion such as the one on the current state of the postmodern paradigm. As I have attempted to show, the ideas to be found in the writings of Alasdair Gray seem to speak quite powerfully in this context. The focus on 'shades of grey/Gray' as opposed to black-and-white essentialism, together with an underlying set of convictions and values, should be seen as a contribution to the postmodernism debate by an ambiguously postmodern writer. In so far, it can be seen in the context of that tentative 'compromise' position I have mentioned initially, which is also apparent in Linda Hutcheon's "postmodern paradoxes" or Stephen Baker's "postmodern political fictions", to give just two examples, and which is likewise implied in several of the essays in this volume. Going beyond postmodernism in this sense involves both an attention to the specific categories and tools that postmodernism has to offer literary analysis and an awareness of its problems and limitations. Whether the result of such an exploration can still be subsumed under a modified concept of postmodernism or necessitates a completely new paradigm still remains open to question.

26 His 'politics', as I have indicated at several points, can be best described as democratic socialism, especially a concern for the disadvantaged of Western capitalist societies, coupled with Scottish nationalism. I cannot here focus on Gray's interest in Scottish national identity and how it is expressed in his works. There can be no doubt, however, that he is a Scottish nationalist in the positive sense of the word (his views are most clearly expressed in his political pamphlet *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*) and that his works – *Lanark*, *Poor Things* and *A History Maker* in particular – are always just as much about Scottish national identity as they are about personal identity.